

Credits

Director	Nagisa Ôshima
Screenplay	Tsutomu Tamura
Photography	Seizô Sengen, Yasuhiro Yoshioka
Music	Hikaru Hayashi

Cast

The father	Fumio Watanabe
The stepmother	Akiko Koyama
The boy	Tetsuo Abe
The little brother	Tsuyoshi Kinoshita

In Brief

Based on a shocking true story, a family makes their living by travelling across Japan, throwing their ten-year old son into traffic and faking bruises in order to extort money from unwitting drivers. Amid the intense and desperate struggle for survival and dignity, *Boy* shows the mixture of love and guilt found in a family as an exploitative trap, and criticises modern Japanese society. As the bruises become real and the prospect of death become too terrifying and sad, the boy questions his “crime”. Shot in scope from Kyushu to Hokkaido, this is one of Oshima's most beautiful, restrained and accessible films.

Japanese Film Festival (Singapore)

Adapting a film from a news story may be nothing new for Nagisa Oshima, but *Boy* (1969) is an overwhelming standout. Right at the heart of Oshima's most productive and self-assured years, *Boy* was one of eleven films made in a five-year period. One might expect such an unbridled creative streak to be full of haphazard hits or misses. Quite the contrary, Oshima was in full control of his manic output, and *Boy* is a perfect example of that.

Intellectually drawn to the story, Oshima felt it was tailor made for him. In 1966 a family was caught using their young son to fake accidents with automobiles in order to extort money. While such scams were not unusual, the callousness of the parents' use of their son was out of the ordinary. Oshima adapted the narrative for his own use, conjecturing a family bound together in their isolated life of crime. The father uses his role to control his wife and ten-year-old son, with a toddler in tow. Seeking approval from his father, the boy is more than willing to carry out the accidents when the wife refuses. Carefully planned jumps in the street brushing against moving cars would send the mother screaming and the father shouting.

The boy's “work” funded a hollow lifestyle that consisted only of superficial pleasures in life. Setting up the grift and then spending their earnings was all a day would offer. Moving from town to town to keep a low profile, the four project an image of a perfect middle class family. At one of the lavish inns, a geisha expresses her envy at such an idyllic family. Eventually, the father loses control of the monster he has created. The mother and son lose sight of reality, no longer questioning morality or legality. The mother becomes driven by money and it's ability to provide normalcy, and the boy is empowered by his new role of provider, leaving the father helpless to the careening train wreck.

Boy is not the emotional tear-draining drama you might expect, but more of a social psychoanalysis of the family unit. That is not to say that the film stays completely detached, but it doesn't take advantage of the story's natural sentimentality. Instead Oshima tears apart the family role that society has created. This is the modern family functioning at its most base form: a primary economic unit. None of the characters are given names only their function within the family: Father, Mother, Boy and Tiny. Father is a veteran injured in the War, who is more than willing to display his scars to prove a point. Although he seems to carry no more than the superficial

burden of his injury, this remains his primary excuse for not getting a job, and furthermore, why Mother and Boy must work for him. Rigid in his belief that society and his family owe him for his suffering, Father rules with an iron fist of guilt. Mother, on the other hand, is more adaptable despite emotional scars that a hard life has brought. Unlike Father, she can see beyond the next meal and the next hotel to a future that is resiliently hopeful. Boy and Tiny are the product of these two dysfunctional adults.

The performance of the young Tetsuo Abe cannot be overstated. The film completely relies on the nine-year-old Abe, who is utterly perfect.





The crew went to great lengths to find the right boy, first interviewing young actors and then resuming their search on the streets and in children's homes where Abe was subsequently found. He is able to express wisdom beyond his years due to his own personal situation: an orphan who had been abandoned by his stepmother. The emotional burden of his character is portrayed with an intricacy that carries the film. Boy's transgressions into the mysterious world of aliens and monsters are his only escape. Vocalizing his imagination to the too-young-to-understand Tiny or simply to himself, he imagines himself an alien from Andromeda. Without friends or school, Boy's only escape is into his fantasy world. It's only near the end of the film when Boy's reality and fantasy collide in an unsettling and painful epiphany of anger.

The transient lifestyle of the family is incredibly vivid. The film crew mimicked the family's vagabond life by traveling the length of Japan. This effort translates well into the film, with scenes in the most unlikely places among the most extreme situations. Whether in the pouring rain or snow showers, the film embraces the natural elements as a perfunctory part of day-to-day life. But what isn't perfunctory are some the locations—the settings of wandering and exploration. From a surreal scene in a track field to Boy's aimless roaming, the surroundings give the film a feeling of being ungrounded.

Boy is a film loaded with powerful images that are poetic and moving isolated on their own. Once Boy has switched allegiances and sided with his stepmother instead of his own father, a patriarchal showdown is inevitable. Alone in an hotel room, Father puts bot Boy

and Mother in their place. The camera rests on the end result: Boy and Mother, lying flat at the bottom of the screen and the husband lording over them, cropped at the waist showing only his lower torso, with Tiny trying to decipher the scene. It's a portrait that tells part of the story without saying a word. Likewise is the image of Boy and Tiny sitting in the snow. Are they looking at us? Are they talking to each other? What does the look on Tiny's face really mean? The actually scene only adds power to the image.

Boy bares a striking similarity to A Town of Love and Hope, Oshima's first film. Oshima confessed later that he secretly decided commemorate his tenth year as director with Boy and attempted to "return to the heart of a novice." He, along with co-writers Masato Hara, Tsutomu Tamura and Mamoru Sasaki, had finished the script three years before production started. Boy is a hammer to the heart with little room for the dark humor or the bold experimentation found in Oshima's other films. Other than moments mimicking documentary newsreel, Boy is shot and edited in a very straightforward manner with few deviations.

Although it is tempting to proclaim that Boy is Oshima's most refined film, this only diminishes his other films. Given the nature of his other films, Boy shows a tremendous amount of restraint alongside the self-confidence of a master. Due to its rarity (available on DVD only in Japan with no subtitles), the current Oshima retrospective traveling the country will be the first opportunity for many to see this incredible film. It is an undeniable masterpiece.

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